

## **Transcript of Marine Corps Times Senior Writer Gina Cavallaro with Gen. David Petraeus**

**June 3, 2011**

### **A diminished Taliban**

Q. You've been traveling ...

A: Yes, we were in south and central Helmand, in Kandahar, including the Najari district, in Khost and in far eastern Kunar all in the last five days.

The progress in southern Helmand ... [has] been quite substantial in the last year or so. Certainly the insurgents are attempting to launch an extreme offensive in those areas, but we think that [our] progress cannot only be sustained, but gradually expanded further as Afghan forces become increasingly capable, as the Afghan national police initiative takes hold.

Of course, the Afghan government's economic development also builds on the foundation of security that is central to progress.

Q. What does it look like compared to last year?

A: The Taliban begins this spring fighting season in Helmand and Kandahar from a very different, diminished position, not controlling some key areas they used to control that were very important support zones ... significantly Marjah, which used to be the nexus of the illegal narcotics industry and the insurgency.

There's no question about the continued relationship between illegal narcotics bosses and the Taliban leadership in Helmand. A substantial amount of the insurgents' funding comes from the narcotics industry and also from some criminal extortion and outside donations.

Q. Where is the fighting expected to be tenacious?

A: The northeastern Helmand area where the Marines continue to expand towards Kajaki Dam remains a very challenging area. So does the area to the northeast of Task Force Helmand and central-north Helmand.

The Taliban has been pushed further out into the desert. The same is true in areas of Kandahar as well. In some cases we think they're actually using sanctuaries in Balochistan [in Pakistan] now, they're having to use those areas rather than areas inside Afghanistan to build IEDs, make homemade explosives, do their planning, so logistically it's more difficult for them.

Having said that, clearly they are intent in carrying out their spring offensive, just as we are intent on carrying out our spring offensive, which has now been under way for approaching two months.

### **Possible drawdown**

Q. What can you say about possible U.S. force reductions?

A: There are options that I am developing as the four-star action officer for this effort. There is one action officer on this effort. You're looking at him. There may be one or two folks ... who think they know something about it. They might be deceiving themselves because there are misdirection plays out there.

I've kept this exclusively close hold. Even my own commander's initiatives group has not been in on this, my executive has not been in on it because I want to assure everybody above me that this is not going to leak, that there will be no kinds of atmospherics as a result of leaks.

I will convey this solely to the commander of [U.S. Central Command], chairman of the Joint Chiefs, secretary of defense. The secretary and chairman will probably be the ones who take it to the president.

What a commander in my position should do is to provide the chain of command and president with options to implement the policy that the president has stated, initiating what he has termed the responsible drawdown of the surge forces, the final 30,000, at a pace determined by conditions on the ground.

That is what we will seek to provide to him, recognizing that every level above me has a broader purview.

Central Command is concerned about an entire theater, not just Afghanistan; the chairman and secretary are concerned about the whole world; you now get into the realities of fiscal challenges, of strain on the force and so forth. The president understandably has to deal with an even broader purview with quite a number of additional concerns and factors.

Q. Your options are developed by talking to commanders on the ground?

Petraeus: They're developed right here at this desk, but they're informed by battlefield circulation. One of the reasons we've done so much travel ... is to see for myself what the situation is.

My recommendations also are informed by the strategic context in which they are offered but not determined by the strategic context. They're determined by my assessment of conditions on the ground.

Q: Apart from any options you might give the president, do you see a shift of U.S. troops away from certain areas, into others?

A: It would be predecisional to begin sketching out our thoughts in that detail, but what I would offer is that our Marines, our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Coast guardsmen, have done phenomenal work in Helmand province. They've taken the momentum in v areas that were very important to the Taliban such as Marjah, Garmsir, Nawah.

They are engaged in a tough fight as they push up Route 611 in Kajaki and in Sangin heading into Kajaki, and they have frankly done what they did in Anbar province [in Iraq], which is demonstrate extraordinary appreciation for the elements required in a counterinsurgency campaign. They've also demonstrated very impressive innovativeness, determination, initiative and above all courage.

I think I'm somewhat uniquely qualified to comment on that. There may be other people who have had six commands in a row as a general officer, but none comes to mind immediately.

And five of those have been in combat, assuming you count CENTCOM as combat, which I certainly think it was, four directly in the theater and as commander of the division in the fight to Baghdad — not just any division, the 101st Airborne Division — and then northern Iraq and then coming back to do Multinational Security Transition Command Iraq, to stand that up to establish it and also simultaneously the NATO transition in Iraq.

Then the tour at [Fort] Leavenworth [Kan.] during which we drafted the counterinsurgency manual and the human intelligence collectors field manual, and also the leadership field manual, which I thought was hugely important because it talked about what we term pentathlete leaders who are equally comfortable responding to a hand grenade or a handshake.

Q. Do you see that in the field?

A: We don't just have pentathlete leaders, we have pentathlete troopers. Our troops are incredible in that regard and they are truly, I think, versatile in a way that may be unique in our military history. They are far and away the most experienced force we've ever had.

Q. How long do you see our presence lasting here?

A: It's really hard to say. Our presence will continue to evolve. Obviously we will implement the president's policy beginning this summer. That is a fact. We will initiate a drawdown of the surge forces at a pace determined by conditions on the ground. That is going to happen. The only question is, which option at the end of the day does he select?

We will increasingly seek, to use President Karzai's term, to "Afghanize" our operations. We obviously very much want our Afghan partners out front, they want to be out front. Afghans are very proud people.

President Karzai warned about the phenomenon of a liberation force becoming an occupation force. We're seen as an occupation force. I've talked about that for years.

Every liberation force has a half-life and it can, over time become seen as an occupation force. You've got to be very sensitive to that. The way you extend a half-life is by not only being seen by the population but by actually taking steps to ensure that the people see you as helping them, securing them, contributing to a better future for them and their families.

Q. Is it possible to achieve here what we've achieved in Iraq?

A: Well, I've said for two years that we would never turn Afghanistan rapidly the way that we were able to turn Iraq.

I did an assessment in September 2005 on the way home from a second tour in Iraq for the secretary of defense. That was a time when the description of Afghanistan was "the war we we're winning," and I told him that I thought Afghanistan was going to be the longest campaign in the "long war," for all the factors that our troopers are so well acquainted with.

This country's been at war for 30 years and it was one of the three poorest in the world when the war began. It has huge challenges from illiteracy, lack of infrastructure, lack of institutions, and it lacks a number of the advantages that Iraq had.

Iraq was truly out of control when the surge [there] began. We had 220 or more attacks a day in Iraq, several orders of magnitude higher than the levels of violence here.

I'm not saying this is a peaceful place by any means, in fact the violence is going up, this is the spring fighting season. We're on the offensive and the enemy is on the offensive and this was certainly predicted. But I have always said that Afghanistan was going to require enormous determination and patience.

Q. Would it be possible to continue at this pace if Pakistan decided to close down the lines of logistics?

A: Well, that's a hypothetical. I will say it's well known that our logisticians are working very hard to ensure that we have multiple means of bringing material and supplies and goods and so forth into Afghanistan, and indeed the reliance on Pakistan for lines of communication has been reduced.

It started back when I was Central Command commander and we opened what was called the northern distribution network and since then there've been a number of additional initiatives. I'm sure there is redundancy and that there are alternatives. [But] frankly, we want very much to continue to be able to use the Pakistani lines of communication, to have a constructive relationship with our Pakistani partners and to work together against the enemies not just of Afghanistan but also the enemies of Pakistan.

### **Death of bin Laden**

Q. What effect has the death of Osama bin Laden had?

A: Afghans, by in large, certainly the vast majority of Afghans, celebrated Osama bin Laden's death. No country has suffered more from Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida than Afghanistan, although Pakistan has suffered a great deal as well.

Having said that, I think there is a realistic appraisal and still a wait-and-see attitude about the effect of Osama Bin Laden's death on the groups that are causing the security problems here, using children as suicide bombers, for example. They are very indiscriminate in the acts of violence.

We hope [bin Laden's death] will mean less financing for all of the groups because he was an iconic figure to a number around the world who had sympathies with extremists. Certainly it's an enormous blow to the al-Qaida enterprise around the world, given the central role he played in that organization, not only as the iconic leader and founder, but also an individual who did guide to a degree various strategic and operational initiatives.

Q. Will his death affect the continued need for U.S. troops?

A: We're obviously evaluating what the effects may be on all of the groups that are seeking to cause security problems for Afghanistan. We are here is to prevent al-Qaida or other transnational extremist groups from reestablishing the kinds of safe havens that existed here before 9/11.

Our objective is to ensure that none of these groups can establish safe haven here on Afghan soil. To do that, we obviously have to help our Afghan partners develop the ability to secure and to govern themselves.

We see steady progress with the [Afghan Security Forces], not just in quantity, but also in capability and quality — recognizing, to be sure, that there's still unevenness among some elements, especially the Afghan uniformed police, but also recognizing that there are increasing numbers of quite capable Afghan forces. There are over 11,000 Afghan special operations forces alone.

These elements are in the lead for targeted operations, so-called night raids in the greater Kabul area, for example, and they execute those raids based on arrest warrants and they do the detention operations. All of these targeted operations now are joint, with the exception of the occasional kinetic operation in a remoter area.

That's quite a substantial change over just last year and represents quite considerable progress, but as always there is much more to be done, the enemy is resilient, the enemy is barbaric in many respects.

It's very clear that the enemies of Afghanistan are seeking to carry out sensational attacks this spring fighting season in particular because they have lost so many important areas and they have lost in the momentum as well.

Certainly into the summer in 2010, any assessment we had showed the Taliban had the momentum — and I'm speaking Taliban now to encompass all the groups — the insurgents had the momentum in much of Afghanistan. That is not the case anymore. Moreover, as I mentioned, they also lost some very important areas in which they used to plan their attacks, build explosive devices, make homemade explosives, treat their wounded, conduct command and control operations, and so forth.

### **ASF attacks on U.S. troops**

Q. Can we talk about the security of the troops and the attacks by Afghan Security Forces that have taken place inside forward operating bases?

A: We have taken a variety of steps, which I'm not going to share, but there are a number of actions under way both in terms of counterintelligence initiatives, actions with our Afghan partners to carefully vet those who are recruited and brought into the Afghan National Security forces, security checks at our bases and even the posture of our forces in various situations.

Q. But it seems so much bolder here though, and frequent.

A: I'm not sure I would share that characterization. There were numerous cases of, insider cases of attacks in Iraq as well. And again, what we did with our Iraqi partners was tighten to the greatest extent possible a variety of different security activities and obviously we've done the same thing here.

I'm not sure that we would say there's a pattern. We think there are different motivations in a number of the cases. Certainly, some have been infiltrators. [But] they're not all necessarily all infiltrators. Some of these are arguments, which tragically in Afghanistan occasionally are settled by shooting rather than shouting.

Q. What would you say to the families of the troops about the safety of their loved ones on these FOBs?

A: What I would tell them is that we have launched a number of different initiatives to do all we can to ensure the safety of our troopers while still ensuring that we carry out the important partnership activities that are such a foundation for our overall approach here.

The fact is that on any given day there are literally hundreds of thousands of Afghan security forces carrying out operations in partnership with tens of thousands of ISAF forces. I'm out all the time with them. Needless to say, I don't have a protective cocoon around me. I actually haven't worn body armor or Kevlar in Afghanistan on this tour. We were out in a little village in Khost, literally walking through the village surrounded by perhaps thousands, certainly hundreds. They all had Afghan flags flying and posed with the provincial governor, a few of the police.

In Iraq I wore body armor much of the time I was there.

Q. In all fairness, you are General Petraeus and do have sort of a cocoon around you.

A: There's no metal partition around me.

Q. But how do you get to the Joe who's in a similar situation, it's got to be eating away at the trust ...

A: This is a challenge, when this happens, obviously it is a challenge. Again, a lot of it comes down to relationships in a lot of these kinds of endeavors.

It's not what I say, it's what the leaders and what the troopers themselves say, and that is that we will get back at it, we're going to redouble our efforts to accomplish the mission that our comrades gave their lives for.

Q. Do U.S. troops they have their fingers on the triggers? Are they maybe scared of some of the Afghans?

A: I'm not sure again that I would say that. Certainly there are cases where there is a degree of apprehension, if you will. A lot of our relationships out there are quite good. As you try to generalize you will undoubtedly [find] cases of individuals who are very apprehensive, but ... there are quite good partnerships out there.

#### **Coalition air strikes**

Q. Afghan President Hamid Karzai said this week that he did not want any more air strikes. What does that mean for U.S. forces?

A: We absolutely share President Karzai's concern about loss of innocent civilian life in the conduct of Afghan ISAF operations, without question. We've made progress in reducing civilian casualties over the course of 2010 and through the first five months of this year. We are here to protect the people, we're here to ensure their security, not to harm them and not to damage their property. In fact, when we damage their property, we compensate them, to repair the damage.

But there has been understandable concern by President Karzai, there has been understandable concern by me, and we're working very hard to reduce those incidents to an absolute minimum.

It's a very difficult issue because we are up against an enemy who does not hesitate to shoot at our troopers from compounds that sometimes contain civilians who are used as human shields.

Q. Is there a restriction on air strikes that you have to follow now?

A: Just a week ago or so I put out a memo reiterating the importance of refamiliarizing all ISAF forces with the tactical directive and other directives that seek indeed to reduce civilian casualties while ensuring that we also protect our forces and our Afghan partners.

This is a very difficult issue, but one that we were seeking to address constructively with our Afghan partners.

Q. Will you be scaling back air strikes then?

A: We have standing directives that are very clear on this issue. I can't go into ... precisely when we can and cannot use airstrikes, but I can tell you that leaders are very sensitive to the possibility of civilian casualties and damage to civilian property.

#### **Taking command of ISAF**

*[On June 23, 2010, Petraeus, then the chief of U.S. Central Command, went to the White House for what he thought would be a routine National Security Council briefing on Afghanistan and Pakistan at which he expected that most of the talking would be done by his subordinate, Gen. Stan McChrystal, chief of coalition forces in Afghanistan.]*

*Petraeus said he was unaware that just before his arrival, President Obama had accepted McChrystal's resignation in the wake of a Rolling Stone magazine article in which McChrystal and his staff made critical comments about senior administration officials. Petraeus said he was equally unaware that Obama would immediately ask him to take McChrystal's place.]*

I truly did go to the White House in late June of last year to attend the monthly National Security Council meeting with the president on Afghanistan and Pakistan, that's why I was in the White House.

We thought that [McChrystal] would go to the White House, there would be a difficult conversation, but he might be kept on. When I went to the White House that morning, I did not know he had offered his resignation

and left.

I did not realize that was not the case until someone stuck his head in the door ... of the office downstairs in the West Wing [where I was] waiting for the meeting to start ... and said, "Has anyone seen General Petraeus?" I had a little bit of a sinking feeling at that time. That's when I had a sense that the president wants to see [me] up in the Oval Office. That's when I realized that the conversation [between Obama and McChrystal] might not have gone the way several of us thought it might.

Everyone was leaving the Oval Office as I was going in, most of them avoiding eye contact, the secretary of defense, secretary of state, national security adviser all were streaming out of the office as I'm going against the tide and into the office. I went in and sat with the president one-on-one and we talked for about 45 minutes.

You know, when a conversation begins with the president saying, "I am asking you as your president and commander in chief," obviously the only answer you can give is yes. I wish I could have gotten word to my wife before the announcement in the Rose Garden, but that's what happens.

We were headed downrange within about five days. Early Thursday afternoon was the announcement, the confirmation hearing was on Tuesday and we were on a plane on Wednesday night.

### **Family support**

Q. Talk about the sacrifices of your family over the past 10 years.

A: My family's been wonderful. My wife has been extraordinary during this time. She's obviously been Mrs. Dad more in the past decade than I've been Mr. Dad [over] a year in Bosnia, nearly four in Iraq, approaching a year here and a lot of time gone while at CENCTOM. So, they've been terrific. We moved our son three times in his four years of high school in the middle of all that.

I was never home for his senior year at all until his graduation. He was first in his class. He went to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and he chose ROTC on his own, in his second year. He served out here as an infantry platoon leader with the 173rd [Airborne Brigade Combat Team] and redeployed last year.

I only saw him one time. Frankly, I sort of avoided him because I didn't want to raise his profile anymore than it might be. But I did go down to Wardak province shortly before he left and had the honor of pinning a Combat Infantryman Badge on his chest which is a very special moment for a dad.

During that time as well my wife was asked first by the Better Business Bureau in 2004, when I had gone for the second time to Iraq, to establish a special program for them that was called Military Line, they'd gotten to know her as the "first lady of Fort Campbell," if you will.

A recent profile accurately described her as something like, "She's small, she's smart, she's nice, she's a pit bull and you want to have her in your corner." I've been privileged to have her in my corner for 37 years and through a lot during that time.

### **Burdens of command**

Q. What was the darkest moment in your command experiences?

A: There have been numerous dark moments. Generally, they are the ones that begin with a radio call; or now, at this level, someone sticks his head in the door or even a sigact [significant activity] report on the computer about significant losses.

We had, for example, when I was commander of the 101st Airborne Division, two helicopters collide in the night over the city of Mosul and lost 17 troopers in one crash ... just a staggering loss for the unit.

I think it's very hard to comprehend, candidly, if you're not part of that unit.

Talk about the roller coaster of command in combat where there are occasional real highs, there are successes ... I remember on the fight to Baghdad for example, in the city of Najaf, basically we liberated them, we liberated the first city in Iraq and subsequent battles, you know, big fights and when you realize you've won.

There are many others like that, when you've just conducted the first election in Iraq, or you opened a border crossing or you brokered some deal with the tribes or fostered reconciliation or heard about three laws or gotten updates about very significant captures of extremist leaders.

There are many of these moments, a degree of sort of what you might call quiet elation because you really try to stay very attached to the earth during those moments, you can't get carried away because you know that you're only one car bomb away from a significant low.

And for our commanders in the field and for those for whom casualties have a face and a name, this is very, very hard.

People have occasionally asked me, "Do you get hardened to casualties?" The first time I was asked this I just looked at the journalist as if, what are you thinking? But you realize again that people who are somewhat detached can't realize, I think, the sort of the responsibility that those who are in charge feel.

Command is both the greatest of privileges and the greatest of responsibilities. We talk about sort of carrying

the rucksack of responsibilities of command. The truth is I always know that in this situation there are nearly 150,000 great ISAF troopers who are helping carry that rucksack.

But at the end of the day a unit only has one commander at a time. So, again, there's no greater privilege but there's also probably no greater roller coaster ride of emotions than that which accompanies command.

What you do try to do is really to maintain calm, you actually very much pick the moments when you demonstrate the full range of emotions. Most of that in fact is, for me, really almost more acting. I may be feeling the full range of emotions but I'm not going to let them show unless I actually want them to show for some reason because otherwise it's just not ... the organization needs calm, steady, determined, steadfast leadership, leaders who can provide an azimuth and offer a bit of vision and try to get the big ideas right.

Really the responsibility of a senior leader, a strategic leader, especially, I think, is indeed to try to get the big ideas right, to communicate them as effectively as possible throughout the breadth and depth of the organization, to oversee implementation and then to look for best practices, worst practices so you can refine the big ideas and do it all over again. And from the degree to which you have a light hand on the reins or it can be fairly directed, it depends on who it is that you're leading.

People often ask, this is a favorite question for journalists to ask of leaders, "How would you describe your leadership style?" I don't usually respond to the question. I ask the journalist, how would you describe the individual that I am leading?

Because I think leaders have to have the ability to find the right style for each subordinate, each unit. Some individuals require nothing more than a pat on the back once a year and very broad guidance and they'll get it right and there are others occasionally who require a bit more direction and perhaps a tad more encouragement.

Q. At your level, you don't really have any peers. Who do you talk with?

A: I think that's one of the challenges of a position like this or the one in Iraq as well ... you're sort of there by yourself to a degree.

You cast a very wide net and I get advice from everyone from sergeants to individual troopers to what we call directed telescopes, I've got a whole host of really bright think tankers, some of whom are actually out here quite a substantial amount of time, old mentors, current mentors, current bosses, Afghan partners, international partners. I've got NATO senior civilian representatives.

Again, there are a number of individuals from whom you can get input, with whom you can discuss the issues and challenges and I try to cast a wide net.

Then there's a fair amount of unsolicited stuff, the age of the Internet. Half the mothers in America have my email address and don't hesitate to ask me to check on this or that.

Moving to the CIA

Q. You are retiring from the military before going to the CIA?

A: I am. I talked to the president about that. I talked to [Defense] Secretary [Robert] Gates about it. We all agreed that the right course of action is to take the uniform off.

That doesn't mean that those who have [served as CIA director] in uniform in the past were wrong. [But] for someone who has the relatively high profile that I have had, it is best I think, to take the uniform off and not to show up in a place like this, if confirmed, as the director of the CIA in uniform and everyone's wondering well who's really in charge of Central Command or Afghanistan.

I will retire. I think that's the right course of action.

I think it sends an important message to the members of the CIA work force. Taking the uniform off ... sends a very important message to the agency, demonstrating frankly that I'm more than capable of grading my own work when I get there.

A lot has been made of the fact that I had somewhat more optimistic assessments of Iraq in 2007 and Afghanistan in December 2010. What they forget is I had a less optimistic perspective than the intelligence community in April 2008, so I've broken both ways and generally it has been because the intelligence community has to cut off their data some six weeks or more in advance of actually presenting a national intelligence estimate to the president.

If those six weeks are very dynamic as they were in 2007, in 2010 and as they were on the other side in 2008, then you can end up with a slightly different situation by the time the report actually hits his desk. I had the advantage of being able to have up to that day to provide my assessment to the president, or in the case of April 2007 or April 2008, to the Congress.

Certainly, an organization, an institution really, a family you've been part of for 37 years, plus four years at West Point, I don't think you leave it. There will always be those ties, the familial relationship will endure.

But I feel very much the excitement of joining a new family, the Agency family, which I've been privileged to

work with for very closely for the past decade. I've worked with numerous chiefs of station in the Balkans, Iraq, throughout the CENCTOM [area of responsibility], in Afghanistan and also worked very closely with Director Panetta.

I feel very privileged to have that opportunity to continue to contribute to continue to serve our country and frankly

Q. Thank you.

A: My pleasure.